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Lord of the (Russian) Spies

Shortly after the arrest of Aldrich Ames for allegedly passing CIA intelligence to Russia, U.S. politicians used the incident as an excuse to question the future of U.S.-Russian relations. Many analysts hailed it as the official end of the post-Cold War thaw.

Behind closed doors in Moscow, the man who handles foreign intelligence for the Russians was taking a far more subtle public approach. Yevgeny M. Primakov told a group of Russian reporters of his surprise at the strong American reaction, especially since his ministry had been cooperating with American intelligence officials on issues of common concern, such as international terrorism and organized crime. At the same time, he was issuing orders to have a top U.S. Embassy official deported in retaliation for America's forced expulsion of a top Russian intelligence official from Washington.

Primakov's message was clear: America and Russia both spy on each other, so let's stop making a big fuss over it.

As head of the reconstituted Russian foreign intelligence service, the SVR, Primakov has emerged as a powerful yet mysterious figure in the unpredictable days of post-Communist Russia. Though the Ames case has been a disaster for the CIA, it has been a big bonus for Primakov, suggesting that this new lord of the spies will be around for awhile.

Primakov, who is the only former crony of Mikhail Gorbachev left in Boris Yeltsin's inner circle, is a man of many contrasts. A former journalist and academician, Primakov's public record is lengthy, yet his private nature has left many unanswered questions. A longtime friend of Saddam Hussein, Primakov nonetheless once suggested to American intelligence officials that Russia would open up its spy operations if America would do the same. A skilled PR man with a flair for winning friends, he presides over a "reformed" Russian intelligence community that many claim hasn't really changed at all from the days of the Soviet Union.

Before Ames made world headlines, a retired KGB general foreshadowed the affair. He told us the changes Yeltsin promised for the KGB have failed to materialize and questioned the frequent claim that staffing levels have been reduced in the foreign intelligence section.

Primakov has rarely given interviews, and when he faces Russian reporters in "briefings," he doesn't answer personal questions. But our associate Dale Van Atta, during a visit to Moscow, talked with a dozen Primakov friends and confidants, as well as SVR contacts, to put together a picture of one of Russia's fastest-rising and most powerful officials.

Born in Kiev, Ukraine, and raised on the streets of Tbilisi, Georgia, Primakov studied the Orient in college and graduate school before becoming an editor with the Moscow Committee on Television and Radio. He then spent almost a decade as a journalist and deputy editor of Pravda. According to several sources, it was at Pravda that he was recruited by the KGB. Sources disagree, however, on whether he was a part-timer or a full-time career officer in the KGB.

After Pravda, Primakov launched his prestigious academic career, rising to be the head of the Institute of Oriental Studies and, from 1985 to 1989, was director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations. It was a period in which he was clearly cozy with KGB officials. His specialty was the Middle East, and one source said his first stop on each trip was a visit with the KGB resident in the country.

Primakov became fast friends with Gorbachev, who dispatched him on several sensitive missions. The most prominent mission—an unsuccessful one—was to Saddam Hussein prior to Desert Storm. It was an attempt to persuade Saddam to leave Kuwait.

Those who know Primakov describe him as affable and cordial, though much more subdued than a decade ago.

Perhaps the greatest testament to Primakov's political skills is his friendship with Yeltsin, which has grown in the months since last fall's showdown with hardline opponents. Primakov is a "clever politician," say his friends, who is convincing in his loyalty. And he's anxious to keep the power which has been growing for him daily.

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